

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 HARARE 000638

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DEPARTMENT FOR G, OES/IHA, OES/PCI, DHRL, AF/S, AF/EPS, IO
WHITE HOUSE FOR ONAP
USAID FOR AFR/AA/AIDW AND BUREAU FOR GLOBAL HEALTH
DHHS FOR OFFICE OF GLOBAL HEALTH AFFAIRS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KHIV](#) [ZI](#) [HIV](#) [AIDS](#)

SUBJECT: HIV/AIDS, ECONOMY EXACTING TOLL ON CHILDREN

Summary

11. (SBU) Almost one-tenth of Zimbabwe's population consists of AIDS orphans--having lost one or both parents to the disease. Most try to carry on living as they had before, although some do take to the streets of the major cities to hustle for a living and/or turn to commercial sex work to make ends meet. During March 2004, poloff met with local NGOs in Harare, Bulawayo, and rural areas in Matabeleland North and Mashonaland East, UNICEF, and the Ministries of Home Affairs and Public Service, Labor, and Social Welfare to discuss the effect both HIV/AIDS and the deteriorating economic situation has had on children; the link between HIV orphans, prostitution, and street kids; and government responses and initiatives to address these problems. The survey confirms conclusions from the most recent Human Rights Report that the GOZ commitment to children's rights and welfare has deteriorated over the last few years in spite of legislation that protects children. The survey also revealed that HIV/AIDS is exacting a heavy toll on children often thrust into adult roles who suffer poor nutrition and abuse and abandon their education, particularly in commercial farm communities. The interviews did not necessarily support the hypothesis that the increase in HIV/AIDS orphans has led to the growing phenomena of street children or child prostitution, which appear to be more a function of Zimbabwe's deteriorating economic situation. End Summary.

Effect of HIV and Economy on Children

12. (U) The combination of the HIV/AIDS and humanitarian crises has resulted in a growing number of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). With formal unemployment estimated at 70 percent and destitution on the rise, the coping strategies, especially within extended families, to look after orphans are quickly being eroded. In addition, orphaned children are often denied access to basic health and educational services and are at increased risk of being abused and contracting HIV.

Situation on Commercial Farms

13. (U) The Farm Orphan Support Trust (FOST), a local NGO established by the Commercial Farmers Union in the early 1990s to address the rising AIDS orphan problem on commercial farms, told poloff that the land redistribution program had eroded the ability of many farm communities to care for non-related children orphaned or vulnerable as a result of HIV/AIDS because of disruptions to employment. The number of orphans on commercial farms in Chipinge in Manicaland and Mashonaland Central jumped from 17 per farm in October 2002 to 25 per farm in October 2003. FOST also recorded an increase in both marriages between young teenage girls and older men and teen births.

14. (U) FOST carried out a baseline survey of OVC on 95 farms in three districts in Mashonaland Central during October 2003. The results of the survey showed that 12.29 percent of households (1722) were classified as vulnerable (having a single parent, elderly, or young primary caregiver). Within the vulnerable cohort, 80.49 percent were female headed, 22.14 percent elderly headed, 8.6 percent headed by someone aged 17-24, and 1.1 percent headed by someone younger than 17. Almost 22 percent (21.66) of all children younger than 17 years of age on the farms were classified as orphaned--having lost at least one parent--or vulnerable--living with a chronically ill parent or caregiver. Two-thirds of the children were younger than 13 years of age.

15. (U) The survey also identified problems these OVC face, including access to schools, health services, and birth certificates. The survey showed that 5,887 children, 43 or 49 percent of the youth population depending on the reference

group, did not have birth certificates. A 2000 enumeration in Mashonaland Central showed more than 40 percent of orphaned children as not having birth certificates.

Matabeleland North

16. (U) In Matabeleland North, Poloff met with Bekezela, a local NGO helping AIDS orphans located in the mining community of Inyathi, Bubi district, and the Matabeleland AIDS Council (MAC) and Masiye Camp in Bulawayo to discuss the orphan situation. The director of Bekezela commented that the number of deaths among people aged 17 to 40 was high and that the orphans were often discriminated against. Forms of discrimination included denial of access to school (boys often herd cattle instead) or adequate clothing, sexual abuse, and overburdening with chores. The director also commented that she had noticed an increase in early marriage of girls aged 14 and 15 to older men, in which presumably orphanhood was a factor. These men are typically members of groups with high HIV risks (gold panners and miners who frequent sex workers), thereby increasing the girls' risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. At one mine in the community, 90 percent of those tested were HIV positive.

17. (U) MAC has been working with Matabeleland companies to develop workplace HIV/AIDS policies but this initiative has not had much success with the area's mining companies, according to Bekezela's observations. When asked if they had seen an increase in child rapes, MAC said they had not. (Note: Many people still believe that having sex with a virgin will cure them of HIV. End Note.) In fact, they said the Traditional Healers Association (THA) had embarked on an HIV training campaign to discourage the membership from encouraging sex with virgins as a cure for AIDS. THA is also teaching safer blood practices to its membership.

Mashonaland

18. (U) In Mashonaland East, poloff met with Uzumba Orphan Trust (UOT) in Uzumba-Maramba-Pfungwe district and Mother of Peace Orphanage in Murehwa. The director of UOT estimated that 75 percent of the orphans in the area were AIDS orphans. UOT said that inheritance practice was a big challenge for many of the children since local custom permits the children's paternal relations to take everything from the deceased relative's home, leaving the children destitute. UOT has been working to sensitize local headmen and communities to the plight of AIDS orphans and to encourage support for them. Neither UOT nor Mother of Peace Orphanage noticed an increasing trend of AIDS orphans migrating to growth points or cities.

Street Kids: A Growing Problem

19. (U) Street kids have grabbed the headlines over the last six months because of recent criminal acts perpetrated by homeless people, as well as government roundups of the homeless. The media and lawmakers have blamed street kids for these crimes, but they often define a street kid or youth as someone as old as 25 to 34 years. Most of the crimes reported in the press were committed by men 18 years and older.

110. (U) In Harare, poloff met with Streets Ahead and Child Protection Society (CPS), Harare-based NGOs that work with street children, and UNICEF to discuss the situation. Streets Ahead and UNICEF indicated that many of the children in the streets are not homeless and live in Harare's high-density suburbs (Epworth, Mbare, Hatfield) but are sent to the city center to work.⁸ Of those children who do live on the streets, the reasons for this phenomenon range from being HIV/AIDS orphans, poverty, and unemployment to step-parent abuse and displacement due to land resettlement. Streets Ahead noted that one sees few girls on the streets during the daytime because they are sleeping in preparation for their nighttime commercial sex work. Last year, Streets Ahead wanted to hold a series of community education meetings to discourage parents from sending their children to the cities to work but were banned from holding the meetings under the repressive Public Order and Security Act that has been used to thwart public demonstrations since its implementation in 2002. CPS noted that even border towns, like Beitbridge at the South African border, are experiencing an increase in street kids, many of whom often engage in prostitution. A formal study to quantify the number of street kids has not been conducted since 2000, when UNICEF estimated Zimbabwe had 12,000.

111. (U) Masiye Camp, a Bulawayo-based NGO that provides psychosocial support and life skills to AIDS orphans, noted an increase in the number of orphans on the street in Bulawayo. Masiye Camp said the children were in the streets for a number of reasons but most had homes to which they could return. Others had run away from institutions. More

than 80 percent of the street kids in Bulawayo are boys, according to Masiye Camp. The director commented that there had also been an increase in prostitution and drug trafficking among minors.

¶12. (U) The Government has responded to the street kid problem by authorizing the Zimbabwe Republic Police to round them up and take them outside of the city limits. The Ministry of Home Affairs and Department of Social Welfare in the Ministry of Public Service, Labor, and Social Welfare maintain that the children aged 16 years and below have been sent to institutions and children's homes and that families have not been separated. The Ministry of Home Affairs was silent on what happens to those over the age of 17 but UNICEF believes them to have been sent to farms to work, unless the Department of Social Welfare assessed them to be criminals. Both Streets Ahead and UNICEF reported hearing credible stories from children of being rounded up and dropped off in the rural areas with no food or water.

Birth Certificates Difficult to Obtain

¶13. (U) The GOZ and NGOs recognize that the current system of birth registries is inadequate and in need of an overhaul. According to UNICEF, 30 percent of children nationwide did not have birth certificates but the situation varied widely from district to district. For example, in Chipinge South in Manicaland 60 percent of children did not have birth certificates while in Rusape, just outside of Harare, 15 percent of children did not have birth certificates. Without a birth certificate, a child cannot proceed beyond grade 7 in school, cannot access available social services, and would not be able to register to vote upon reaching age 18. FOST and Streets Ahead hypothesized that birth registrations were not happening because of an inherent mistrust of foreigners (many farm workers are foreign born) and the idea that farm workers are anti-government (in the case of farm worker families) and that orphans would become opposition voters once they get older.

¶14. (U) Poloff met with Deputy Minister of Home Affairs Shadreck Chipanga to discuss the issue of birth certificates. Chipanga is also the MP for Makoni East, a district in Manicaland with a high proportion of farm workers who trace their roots to neighboring countries and who do not own identity cards. Chipanga denied the theory that the GOZ was not interested in getting farm worker families and orphans registered for fear that they would become opposition party supporters. He lamented the fact that in his own district, lots of people did not have birth certificates or identity cards so they could not register to vote or vote for him. (Note: The identity card issue has a long history in the commercial farming sector. Commercial farm workers typically came from Mozambique, Zambia, and Malawi and did not need identification cards to work. Several had no identification from their native countries so they couldn't obtain identity documents from Zimbabwe either. Because the parents need to have identity cards or birth certificates to register their children, these immigrants, children were also not registered. Commercial farmers didn't facilitate obtaining birth certificates for farm worker children because the children then could go to school beyond grade 7 and would more likely leave the cheap farm labor pool. End Note.) Chipanga identified recent legislation (the Citizenship of Zimbabwe Amendment Act) and initiatives (sub-offices in clinics and hospitals to record births immediately) that would facilitate birth registries and obtaining Zimbabwean identification cards.

Government Response

¶15. (U) True to GOZ statements of late, the Director of the Department of Social Welfare in the Ministry of Public Service, Labor, and Social Welfare expressed a certain mistrust and disdain for the NGO community working on the problems of AIDS orphans and street kids. In a meeting with poloff, the director lamented the lack of coordination between the NGOs and government and among the NGOs themselves. He also asserted that the NGOs have an interest in not helping the children fully and in trying to keep children on the streets or otherwise dependent on NGO services. Despite this disdain, the Ministry has worked with the NGO community on a number of initiatives to address the burgeoning problem of OVC and street kids.

¶16. (U) In June 2003, the Government, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations (CBO), faith-based organizations (FBO) and children met at a national stakeholders conference in Harare to widen the consultative process and secure broad-based support for a National Plan of Action for Orphans and other Vulnerable Children (NPA). The Plan seeks to ensure that OVC are able

to access education, food and health services, birth registration, and protection from abuse and exploitation through coordinated efforts by government and civil society. The Plan is currently under government review.

¶17. (U) Prior to the NPA, Zimbabwe had two key national policies and a legal framework specifically geared to support children. Legislation pertinent to children included the Child Protection and Adoption Act, the Guardianship of Minors Act, the Maintenance Act, and the Child Abduction Act. National policies included the National Orphan Care Policy and the National AIDS Policy, both adopted in 1999, which reflected traditional ways of doing things and promoted collaboration between government and civil society. The government also adopted a number of programs to assist OVC such as:

- The Basic Education Assistance Module (a tuition fee, levy and examination fee assistance provided to OVC);
- Public Assistance, Drought Relief and Assisted Medical Treatment Programs for vulnerable families;
- A three-percent tax levy to support the National HIV/AIDS Policy;
- The National Strategy on Children in Difficult Circumstances;
- OVC programs implemented in partnership with CBOs, FBOs, and NGOs.

¶18. (U) The Government, NGO, CBO, and FBO community also formed two task forces last year to address the problem of street kids. The Harare Street Children Task Force comprised local NGOs and the Ministry of Public Service, Labor and Social Welfare. According to UNICEF, it met a few times and then fizzled out. The National Task Force on Children in Difficult Circumstances held a workshop in December 2003 in which street children took part. The results of the workshop are not yet available.

Comment

¶19. (SBU) Poloff's meetings with NGO and government representatives were both disconcerting and encouraging. It was troubling to discover that there are nearly one million AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe and that the support systems available to them are haphazard. The mere existence of legislation that purports to safeguard the rights of the orphan child are rendered meaningless if the general population is ignorant of the laws, the laws are not implemented or enforced, or the general population chooses to adopt traditional methods of handling the orphans that are detrimental to the child. It was encouraging, however, to discover that government ministries are aware and concerned about the problem and seem to be actively seeking solutions, often in collaboration with NGOs. Unfortunately, the number of AIDS orphans is so large that it will be difficult for government to manage the problem effectively and to preserve and build human capital without both an improvement in the economic conditions in the country and an infusion of assistance from the international community.

¶20. (SBU) The dimensions of Zimbabwe's problem may not have reached the scale of other countries, but with no relief to the economy's implosion in sight, the challenges posed by Zimbabwe's street kid population can be expected to grow. The GOZ's handling of street kids (rounding them up and shipping them out) is inadequate and myopic, since it does not address the root causes for the children's migration. Perhaps with outside support, the existing task forces on street kids can come up with viable solutions to prevent the problem from rising to the level of that seen in other countries like Kenya. Until then, children will take to the streets to hustle for a living, either through begging, prostitution, or criminal activities, instead of attending school and becoming productive members of society. The growing problem will not only increasingly stress the GOZ's already overextended social services, but also lead to a generational human resources deficit that can potentially constrain the country for many years to come. End Comment.
SULLIVAN